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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 002135

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SUBJECT: JAMMU AND KASHMIR: INDIA MOVES AHEAD, OPENS
DIALOGUE WITH SEPARATISTS

REF: A. NEW DELHI 1625

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 195

[1](#)C. NEW DELHI 118

[1](#)D. 2008 NEW DELHI 2746 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Counselor Uzra Zeya, Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Not waiting for the Delhi-Islamabad composite dialogue to resume, India has moved forward unilaterally on the Delhi-Srinagar dialogue and its efforts for reconciliation in Kashmir. Home Minister Chidambaram announced on October 14 that the GOI will talk directly "with all shades" of separatists as long as they do not espouse violence. This is the first time since early 2006 that the GOI has publicly said it is willing to talk directly and seriously to Kashmiri separatists. Chidambaram set no preconditions for the talks and refused to be drawn into the details, saying that the discussions would take place quietly, behind closed doors. Embassy has learned that the GOI started talking to the moderate separatists some weeks ago. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq, speaking for the moderates, welcomed the GOI announcement but hardliner Syed Ali Shah Geelani dismissed it as meaningless. The political and security environment could not have been better aligned to enable the GOI to move forward on Kashmir. With the parliamentary elections out of the way, a strong mandate from the electorate, a feeble opposition and an insurgency that is at its weakest in two decades, the Prime Minister and the Home Minister are dealing from a strong hand. It bodes well for regional stability that the GOI appears to be moving forward aggressively, on its own and without any prodding from others, on important aspects of the Kashmir. End Summary.

GOI Announces Dialogue with Separatists

[1](#)2. (U) In an October 14 press conference in Srinagar, Home Minister P.C. Chidambaram announced that the GOI would hold a dialogue with separatists, noting that the GOI recognizes there are many "shades of opinion" in Kashmir and the GOI needs to consult with all sections, including moderates, hardliners and extremists, as long as they do not espouse violence. Every voice will be heard, he said, but there is

"no room for violence." His press interaction received heavy nationwide media attention because it was the first time since early 2006 that the GOI has publicly said that it is willing to talk seriously and directly to the separatists. Chidambaram's remarks were also widely covered because they were made in advance of the Prime Minister's planned October 27 visit to the valley, when he will inaugurate a rail link. Sonia Gandhi is also expected to attend this event.

13. (U) Chidambaram also sent several other signals suggesting that the GOI is moving forward on reconciliation in Kashmir (septel). He announced that the GOI would seek a political rather than a military/paramilitary solution, and one that is "honorable, equitable, and acceptable to (an) overwhelming majority of the people of Jammu and Kashmir." He acknowledged the special nature of the Kashmir issue, saying that the GOI recognizes that the "unique geographical location and unique history" of Kashmir may require an equally unique solution. He unveiled some confidence building measures -- the indigenous Jammu and Kashmir Police (rather than the non-Kashmiri paramilitary and Army) would have primary responsibility for maintenance of law and order in the state -- and he hinted the GOI would take additional steps.

Separatists Welcome Announcement, Geelani Dissents

14. (U) All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) leader Mirwaiz Omar Farooq immediately welcomed Chidambaram's announcement,

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saying it was a "good step" and "talks are the only way to find a solution to the Kashmir problem." He noted that he and his fellow separatist leaders had been calling for a dialogue with New Delhi for some time. Most of the separatists leaders agree more or less with Mirwaiz's words but the notable exception is hardliner Syed Ali Shah Geelani, who has steadfastly resisted any talks with New Delhi. Responding to the Chidambaram's statement, Geelani said: "Talks have been held over 130 times between Kashmiris and New Delhi since March 23, 1952, but failed to achieve desired results. There is nothing new in the offer of talks." He observed that the Kashmir issue could only be resolved through "tripartite talks or implementation of relevant UN resolutions."

Outside the Media Glare

15. (U) Chidambaram set no preconditions for the talks with the separatists and refused to be drawn into a discussion of the shape, form, timeframe or parameters for the talks, saying the government will follow the policy of "quiet diplomacy" away from the glare of the media. He said that the discussions will be made public at an appropriate time, when agreement on the "broad contours of a political solution" have been reached.

Delhi-Srinagar Dialogue Already Underway

16. (C) Chidambaram did not reveal that behind the scenes talk are already underway. Separatist leader Bilal Lone told Poloff in September that the GOI had approached the separatists quietly some weeks earlier and the two sides are now engaged. Journalist Praveen Swami, who has close ties to the Indian security and intelligence establishment, confirmed to Poloff that GOI-separatist talks are in progress.

17. (C) There have been other signs as well that the GOI had begun to soften its approach to the separatists. The GOI has relaxed many of its travel restrictions on the separatists. Jammu and Kashmir's Director General of Police told Poloff that separatists, including Geelani, are free to travel wherever they want. The GOI appears to have resolved the

visa/residency issues of the Mirwaiz's Indian-American wife. The Pakistani spouses of separatist leaders Sajad Lone and Yasin Malik have joined their husbands in Srinagar after the GOI cleared their visa/residency applications recently. Geelani was given permission to travel to London to attend an All Party Kashmir Coordination Committee conference on October 24. (Note: His application for a U.K. visa was still in process with the U.K. High Commission as of October 21.)

Mirwaiz's U.N. Trip Complicates Matters

18. (C) Mirwaiz Farooq's September attendance at the OIC Foreign Ministers Conference on the sidelines of the UNGA meetings complicated the atmosphere for a Delhi-Srinagar dialogue. Indian press reported that he made the case for Kashmir in meetings with several foreign ministers, including from Iran and Turkey. The appointment of an OIC Special Envoy for Kashmir was not well received in New Delhi. Unrelated to the Mirwaiz visit, the Washington Post's October 9 op-ed by Saudi prince Turki Al-Faisal linking Kashmir to resolution of the Afghanistan-Pakistan problem caused consternation in India. Al-Faisal's call for President Obama to push India and Pakistan to "fix" Kashmir plays directly into the Indian sensitivity about international interference in Kashmir. His argument that India is beholden to the United States because of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal is dismissed by strategic thinkers here as simplistic musings of someone who is unfamiliar with India, but it does provide fodder for domestic political players opposed to closer

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U.S.-India relations.

Broad Support for Dialogue

19. (C) The fact that there is broad political consensus within the valley in favor of such talks makes it easier for the GOI and Chidambaram to move forward. All three mainstream political parties in the valley -- the National Conference (NC), the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Congress Party -- are strongly supportive of the GOI-separatist dialogue. This may seem somewhat counterintuitive because the mainstream parties presumably compete with the separatists for the hearts and minds and support of the Kashmiri population. Yet, the common view of the mainstream political parties is that the separatists should be engaged because they represent an important Kashmiri sentiment, whether or not they have popular support and influence among the Kashmiri people at this point.

110. (C) PDP President and Leader of the Opposition Mehbooba Sayeed Mufti was the most insistent that the separatists be brought into the discussion, saying it would be a grave error to disregard them simply because Kashmiris had rejected their call for a boycott of the state and parliamentary elections. She told Poloff that the separatists filled a certain political space that could not be ignored if the GOI seeks a political solution. Noting that the PDP was an early champion of the need for a GOI-separatist dialogue, she was disdainful of the two other mainstream parties for joining the GOI-separatist dialogue bandwagon late and only when it appeared that the separatists were politically weakened. A Kashmir observer in Delhi told Poloff that Mehbooba is looking five years ahead to see if she might be able to challenge the ruling National Conference-Congress coalition with a coalition of her own with separatist elements if they were to enter the election process.

111. (C) Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah told the press: "If we do not talk to teh the separatists, we will make a big mistake. My government will facilitate such a process." National Conference chief and Indian Minister of Renewable Energy Farrukh Abdullah told PolCouns that he is a strong proponent of dialogue between New Delhi and Srinagar,

saying that the GOI cannot simply ignore the separatists. In his view, the GOI should "satisfy the hurt egos" of the separatists by having the Prime Minister talk to them. Jammu and Kashmir Congress Party chief Saifuddin Soz complained to Poloff that the separatists reject the "democratic process." He said that Kashmiris see through them today and do not fall for the fantasy of autonomy and independence that was sold to them. Despite the rejection of the separatists by the Kashmiri electorate, "they still matter," and the GOI should talk to them, Soz added.

Comment: Cause for Caution

¶12. (C) While the public announcement of a dialogue with the separatists serves the Indian government well in demonstrating to Kashmiris and Indians that it is moving ahead, there are many uncertainties about what the dialogue will be able to achieve. The Indian effort no doubt will be first and foremost to bring the separatists into the tent rather than leave them on the outside where they can, at a minimum, continue to be a thorn. Beyond that, there are several looming obstacles which could complicate the GOI's path to any tangible results. First, the separatist camp is today and always has been one of many voices and viewpoints in Kashmir. Whereas in the past it may have served the GOI to promote division among the separatists, the GOI effort today will be to see a united separatist camp, one with which they can cut a sustainable deal. The moderates in the APHC appear to be in line behind the Mirwaiz, although the unity

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may come under pressure once the dialogue gets going and proposals need to be acted upon. The GOI must also talk to others such as Yasin Malik and Shabir Shah and Sajad Lone, each of whom have their independent bases and are not part of the APHC and have a history of ups and downs in their relationship with the APHC.

¶13. (C) Second, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, who heads one of two APHC factions, is adamantly opposed to any talks with the GOI. During the Amarnath protests last year and the Shoppian protests this year (reftels), Geelani consolidated support among the protestors and other slices of the Kashmiri population as he increasingly became the public face of anti-India protests. It is risky for the GOI and the other separatists to move forward without bringing him along because it will leave him as the only voice of uncompromising anti-India sentiment in the valley. Third, the GOI and the separatists have to factor in the threat of physical harm to separatist leaders from terrorist elements opposed to any reconciliation with India on Kashmir. For the separatists, this looming threat will discourage any bold deals.

¶14. (C) Finally, the GOI must also walk a delicate line between the separatists and the mainstream political parties. The GOI would want to avoid a dialogue that strengthens the separatists so much that it undermines the mainstream political parties, which have remained part of the political process in Kashmir and played by the GOI's rules. The mainstream political parties would probably not be so supportive of a GOI-separatists dialogue if the separatists had not been as weak as they are today in terms of popular support in the valley.

Comment: Stars Favorably Aligned

¶15. (C) The political and security environment could not have been better for the GOI to move forward on Kashmir. With the parliamentary elections out of the way, a strong mandate from the electorate and a weakened opposition, the Prime Minister and the Home Minister are dealing from a strong hand. They have no important state assembly elections on the horizon. In Jammu and Kashmir they have a stable, newly-elected government with a young, relatively popular

Chief Minister in place. The insurgency is weaker than it has been in years. The winter is setting in, which means infiltration will decline and violence will further subside. And, for the first time since 2004, they have a strong Home Minister who has the political capital to overrule the security and intelligence agencies which instinctively tend to resist political solutions, negotiations and compromises when they are winning the ground war against the insurgency. It is for these reasons that the GOI chose not to wait for the Delhi-Islamabad composite dialogue to resume before moving forward on the pieces it can control -- the Delhi-Srinagar dialogue with the separatists and its own unilateral confidence building approach to the Kashmiri people. It is encouraging for regional stability that the GOI appears to be moving forward aggressively, on its own and without any prodding by others, on an important aspect of the Kashmir question - reconciliation with its own people.

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